

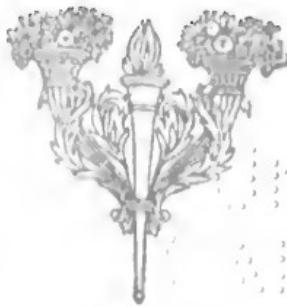


Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2008 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation





# IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS



BY

LORIN F. DELAND  
"

REVISED AND ENLARGED



HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

TO MILES  
MORRISON

THE A. E. MORRISON  
MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Copyright, 1909, by HARPER & BROTHERS.  
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I-N

MORRISON'S  
CALIFORNIA  
WHALES

HF  
5391  
D37 i

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

THE A. F. MORRISON  
MEMORIAL LIBRARY

# IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

## I

WHEN Napoleon caused the names of his dead soldiers to be inscribed on the face of Pompey's Pillar, some one criticized the act as "a mere bit of imagination." "That is true," replied Napoleon, "but imagination rules the world."

The subject of imagination is a large one. Even our morals come, in part, from the imagination—as the virtue of pity. Doubtless it would be impossible for a human being absolutely devoid of imagination to feel the emotion of pity. But let us consider the application of

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

imagination to one thing: namely, to business. It would be easy to trace the world's inventions to its imaginative men, and tell interesting stories of the gain to the individual from a single thought. We had all watched children go scuffling along to school, stubbing their toes at every step, and it meant nothing to us. But one day an imaginative man watched them, and saw the effect of putting a thin strip of copper across the toe of the boy's boot. The world gave him a million dollars. It could afford to, out of the many millions it saved. Or, leaving inventions aside, we might trace the imagination which made the waterfall of Niagara feed the electric lamps in the city of Buffalo, twenty miles away.

But, confining our thoughts within an even smaller circle, let us follow the workings of the imagination in the most material form of business—that of ordinary merchandising. I believe that imagination is as valuable—I do not

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

say as essential, but as valuable—in the management of trade as in any of the arts. It is as valuable, it is as applicable, and with the single exception of the art of literature, it is as essential.

But just what do we mean by imagination? If our research is to be carried to any distance, the word should be clearly defined. Is not the best definition, to put it concisely, this: Imagination is the synthesis of the mind; that is, the opposite of analysis? It is the putting together of things into a compound, not the separation of a compound into its parts. It is the relating of one thought or object to another and different one; or, rather, the relating of separate elements or objects. Its nature is dual; it manifests itself in two directions—range and intensity.

Here on the wall hangs a sword carried in the Civil War. Two men of imagination look at it. One of them instantly imagines the conditions of

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

society which brought about the war; he thinks of slavery, of the horrors of the middle passage, of the scenes of terror in the Bight of Benin, and lo! in a twinkling he is a hundred years and three thousand miles away from that sword. That is *range*. The second man looks at the same sword, and he sees the battle, the charge at the fortifications, and the fearful slaughter. He hears the bugles blowing the advance, and he listens to the deafening roar of the cannon and the higher-voiced rattle of musketry. The groans of the wounded sound in his ears. Already a whole epic is acting itself out upon the stage of his brain, and that simple sword is its beginning and its end. That is *intensity*.

Imagination, then, is the ability, upon seeing any object, to construct around that object its probable or possible environment; thus, apprehending any force, to realize what produced it, and what it will produce. The man of imag-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

ination writes a drama. His dramatic instinct apprehends the power of contrasts; he constructs a plot; he realizes what each person will do, and why he will do it. His characters take possession of his will; they act out their own destiny—often against their author's own desire. *He* relates it all together.

Take the simplest instance of this relating of one thing to another in business. Let me say here, in passing, that I shall not introduce into the consideration of our subject any supposititious occurrences or any imaginary happenings. You would have the right, very properly, to challenge such illustrations, and I should be proving my point much in the same manner in which our friends, the Baconians, establish the authorship of the great plays. So let it be clearly understood that each illustration is an actual fact, either in my experience, or of which I have been cognizant. And one other point: it is difficult at times to draw the line be-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

tween imagination and sagacity. Starting in sagacity, a man's action often proceeds by imagination. The two become blended. Perhaps it is not too much to claim that, as sagacity emerges from the present, the existing, and the seen, into the future, the unborn, and the unapprehended, it becomes imagination. I shall try to confine myself to instances of action which proceed forth from imagination.

We were about to consider the simplest illustration of this relating of one thing to another in business. Let me tell the story of two bootblacks. We can scarcely go lower in the business scale. These two boys, of about the same age, I found standing, one Saturday afternoon, on opposite sides of a crowded thoroughfare in Springfield. So far as could be judged, there was no preference between the different sides of the street, for an equally large crowd seemed to be moving on both sides. The bootblacks had no regular stand,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

but each had his box slung over his shoulder, and, standing on the curb-stone, solicited the passers-by to stop and have a shine. Each boy had one "call," or method of solicitation, which he repeated at regular intervals. The two solicitations were entirely different, but each was composed of four words. They never varied them. Yet one of these boys, by the peculiar wording of his solicitation, secured twice as much business as the other, so far as one could judge, and I watched them for a long time.

The cry of the first boy was, "Shine your boots here." It announced the simple fact that he was prepared to shine their boots. The cry of the second boy was, "Get your Sunday shine!" It was then Saturday afternoon, and the hour was four o'clock. This second boy employed imagination. He related one attraction to another; he joined facts together; his four simple words told all that the first boy said, and a

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

great deal more. It conveyed the information, not simply that he was there to shine shoes, but that to-morrow was Sunday; that from present appearances it was likely to be a pleasant day; that he, as a bootblack, realized they would need an extra good shine; and, somehow, the sentence had in it a gentle reminder that the person on whose ears it fell had heretofore overlooked the fact that the next day was the Sabbath, and that any self-respecting Christian would wish his shoes shined before he repaired to the sanctuary. Perhaps it was merely good luck that this boy secured twice the business of the other, but I have seen too many of such experiences to think of them as accidental.

Take another case, not in my own experience, but which happened to Heinemann, the European publisher. He once noticed two peddlers standing side by side, selling toy dolls. One of them had a queer, fat-faced doll, which he was

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

pushing into the faces of the passers-by, giving it the name of a well-known woman reformer, then prominently before the public. His dolls were selling rapidly, while the man beside him, who had a really more attractive doll, was doing comparatively little business. A thought occurred to Heinemann, and he tried an experiment. Calling the second peddler to one side, "My friend," he said, "do you want to know how to sell twice as many of these dolls as you are selling now? Hold them up in pairs, two together in each hand, and cry them as 'The Heavenly Twins.'" The toy-vendor somewhat grudgingly followed his advice. It was at a time when Sarah Grand's famous novel was at the height of its popularity, and the title of the book was on every one's tongue. Perhaps it was merely another case of good luck, but the Heavenly Twins dolls were an instantaneous success, and within one hour the vender of the woman-reformer dolls gave up the fight, acknowl-

## **IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS**

edged himself beaten, and moved five blocks down the street to escape the ruinous competition. Here, again, is the relating of one thing to another, though in this case it was the relating of a popular name to an absolutely foreign subject. Of course, the relation was wholly illogical; but it "got there" just the same.

## II

THE imaginative man sends his thought through all the instincts, passions, and prejudices of men; he knows their desires and their regrets; he knows every human weakness and its sure decoy. Let me illustrate next that use of the imagination in business which is cleverly built on the frailties of mankind. It may be instanced in as many ways as there are human weaknesses. Under this head comes the subscription book, offered to you in a delicately-worded circular, explaining that an edition of two hundred copies only is to be printed, and the plates then destroyed, thereby insuring the rarity of the book. If we stop and think a moment, we recognize that here is a

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

direct appeal to vanity and selfishness. Yet how it works! Men are gratified even to be included in the list of recipients of such an invitation. And yet, really, the invitation is tantamount to an insult, for it assumes your overmastering vanity and selfishness by making its strongest appeal in this direction.

Another weakness in human nature is the inability to throw away an element of value, even though it cannot be utilized. Many years ago one of the large retailers of Oriental rugs in this country, the representative of leading houses in Smyrna and Constantinople, found themselves overloaded with goods. The situation was critical unless a certain part of their stock could be turned over at once. The firm had but one proposition to make: namely, a great sacrifice sale of its smaller sizes of rugs, with a reduction in price of from fifty to sixty per cent. to insure the movement of at least a thousand rugs, at

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

retail, within one week. An average price on small Oriental rugs—take them as they come—would be thirty to thirty-five dollars. This called for an average loss of profit on each rug of from fifteen to twenty dollars. But just here imagination was applied, and another course was recommended and adopted, which was based upon the inability of the average person voluntarily to throw away an element of value. This was twenty years ago, and the plan has since lost much through familiarity; but in those days it was a novelty, and it worked most effectively.

Briefly, it purposed—not to sell rugs, oh, dear, no!—but to determine the relative advertising merits of the different newspapers of the city in which this house was located. A test was to be made for six days. Of course, the firm was willing to pay something for such information, and so in each paper there was printed a facsimile of a one-dollar bill, made out in the name of the firm,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

and good during the next six days, to the extent of one dollar, on the purchase of any Oriental rug at their establishment. The imitation one-dollar note was somewhat crude, but in size and general appearance it suggested a dollar bill, and results showed that it was difficult for many persons to regard it in any other light. At least, they found it as hard to let it go unused as if it had been indeed a genuine dollar. To all intents and purposes it was a one-dollar bill, provided it was spent at a certain store during a certain limit of time and for a certain article. It seems incredible now, for the experiment was not tried in a large city, yet within three days the volume of rugs sold amounted to the largest total yearly discount limit; in other words, the greatest discount given to any retail house if the volume of its sales in one year could be made to equal this total.

The anticipation of one thousand rugs was far exceeded in the performance,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

and the week ended with sales of sixteen hundred rugs. On these there had been a total discount of sixteen hundred dollars, with but little more than the customary daily amount of advertising, and a complete saving of the large sacrifice which had at first seemed to the firm to be inevitable. The experiment was a bold one, for had it failed the firm must have suffered ten days' delay at a time of pressing necessity. I had faith in the plan, however, because it was founded on a principle in human nature—the inability to throw away an element of value.

Mark this fact! It was not the price. It never is. It was the reason for the price. If, instead of giving the buyer one dollar toward his purchase money, they had taken twelve dollars off the rug, there might have been sold, perhaps, two hundred of those rugs—scarcely more! But by making one-twelfth as good an offer in a more imaginative form, they sold—not two

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

hundred rugs, but sixteen hundred.  
That is imagination in business!

When the late Phillips Brooks held a series of religious services on Sunday evenings in Faneuil Hall, Boston, some doubt was expressed as to the size of the audience, since it was plainly announced that these services were for the "waifs" and "strays" of the city, and not for church-goers. The club of young men who had the matter in hand left to me the question of deciding what course would insure the largest possible attendance. I went the first night, and found the hall well filled. The second night the attendance had dwindled perceptibly, and the third Sunday night there was scarcely more than half an audience. I called the committee together, and told them that the audience had grown so small that we must hereafter have admission wholly by ticket. I still remember their consternation at this proposal. Their argument was a very natural one: if you cannot get

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

people to come now, when there is no barrier whatever to their coming, how do you expect to get them to come when you refuse to admit them unless they have a ticket? But we carried the plan through, and thereafter no one was admitted who did not have a ticket. *From that night* the hall was full at every service. I made the ticket so that it resembled in appearance a season ticket to the most expensive course of lectures or entertainments. As might have been expected, the people who got these tickets found it quite impossible to sacrifice an element of value, however slight that value was. They were entitled to attend divine service that night at Faneuil Hall, while Tom, Dick, and Harry, their neighbors, were not. And this slight advantage many of them could not relinquish.

Mr. Moody, the evangelist, found it necessary to employ this same method when he held services in the great tabernacle in Boston many years ago. His

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

attendance, large at first, soon fell off materially; but Mr. Moody, to correct this, announced that attendance would be by ticket only; within a week the great tabernacle was crowded at every service, and this continued up to the last meeting.

Perhaps we might leave the domain of business for one moment, and remind ourselves of the working of this law in the privacy of our own homes, when one's wife says, "My dear, there are only a few more of these strawberries left; they can't keep 'till to-morrow; I wish you'd eat them up to-night so they won't spoil!" There again is the element of value which so rarely can be thrown away gracefully.

But returning to business, let me relate another experience along the same line. It happened back in the eighties, but human nature has not changed in the intervening quarter of a century A leading organ man-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

ufactory found that by actual count they had, in the preceding fifty years, manufactured and sold a larger number of organs than any other maker in the world. In other words, they held the world's record of sales, the number being two hundred thousand. The problem was to determine how best to utilize the advantage contained in this fact. I suggested that they offer a prize for the best popular conception of the number two hundred thousand; that they publish this offer widely throughout the country, which, in itself, would call attention in an interesting way to the fact that they had manufactured two hundred thousand organs. They were then to take the fifty best conceptions of this large total, making an engraving to illustrate each one, and publish the whole in an attractive pamphlet, of which they should issue an edition large enough to make the cost of the book not to exceed one cent. It could be mailed for another cent, so that

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

they could supply them to the public at a cost of two cents; or, in other words, any one enclosing a two-cent stamp in a letter would receive the book by mail; and if a large number of these books could be distributed, it would be substantially free advertising, for it would be advertising which involved no expenditure beyond the labor of mailing the books. It was found that an edition of one hundred thousand copies would have to be printed to bring the cost to this low limit, and the firm questioned whether so many as this could be disposed of by a simple offer that the book would be sent on receipt of a two-cent stamp. Without giving the subject very much thought, I advised that it was perfectly safe, and the company accordingly went ahead and prepared the book.

Four months later, in discussing another matter, they referred to the failure of their efforts to dispose of the book, and their chagrin at finding so large an

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

edition on their hands which they could not use. It appeared, on further conversation, that to dispose of them they had advertised them once in the *Youth's Companion*, a paper which at that time had a circulation of over four hundred thousand copies. They showed me the advertisement. It measured about six inches, single column, and, in good plain type, announced that a book entitled "How Large is 200,000?" had been prepared, with over fifty illustrations, finely printed, making an attractive volume of forty-eight pages, which would be sent free on receipt of a two-cent stamp. In all the time which had elapsed since that advertisement had appeared they had received 788 replies, and, consequently, an edition of 99,212 books was still upon their hands. The man who was responsible for this operation felt his humiliation, but nevertheless he believed that he could get rid of those books, by an advertisement *in the same paper*, inserted once only, and in a

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

smaller space—virtually a mere repetition of the previous offer.

Accordingly, the following advertisement appeared: At the top were the words, PRIZE REBUS. Under this heading there was a simple rebus, one of the old-fashioned kind once dear to the "regular subscriber," although this particular puzzle was so easy of solution that any person of ordinary intelligence could not fail to work it out in a reasonable time. Under the rebus was the offer, which was to the effect that the books had been prepared, that a certain edition had been printed, that no more would be thereafter printed, and that the books would not be distributed any longer upon request, but would be given as prizes to any one who could solve the rebus there given. Of course the rebus, being exceedingly simple, would be solved readily; it then entitled its interpreter to a book, and we find ourselves at once back on the old ground of a person entitled to an advantage,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

and called upon to choose whether he will avail himself of that advantage by a very slight expenditure, or sacrifice the advantage with no expenditure. The advertisement was inserted once, and I heard nothing further from the organ company for a time. Then came a letter saying, "Where is this thing going to end? We have sent out twenty-three thousand books on that one advertisement up to last Saturday night. We have now a force of five women employed in opening letters and mailing books. Had we not better prepare another edition?"

So it went on for *ten weeks* more, finally breaking all known records for the number of replies from any single advertisement.

Now, what was the defect in the first offer? It employed no imagination. It did not reckon with human nature; or, rather, it went directly contrary to a law of human nature. There is a belief, deep-seated in the human mind, that

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

the thing which you can get for nothing is worth nothing. The public very properly accepted this book at its publisher's own appraisal; he offered it for nothing, therefore it was worth nothing. It would be possible for me to go further, and tell you how the advantage was followed up in this case, and organs were sold to the people who had solved the prize rebus, but that is what Kipling calls "another story," and does not properly belong under this particular weakness of human nature.

I want to give just one more illustration along this line. A leading publisher conceived the idea of preparing a series of pictures of the great battles of the Civil War. There were many subjects in the series, and they were finely executed from originals by famous artists. With no pains or expense spared, and sure of success, a very large edition was printed. They were offered to the public at five dollars each. It was never intended to reduce this price, except to

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

quote a slightly lower rate for the complete series. But the pictures were a dead failure. When I examined into this particular venture the account on the books of the firm stood charged with an expenditure of over fifty thousand dollars, against which there were receipts amounting to seven hundred dollars, representing the sales of the first six months. Net loss up to that date: forty-nine thousand, three hundred dollars. It was evident that this was a bad investment. The question was whether it would not be wise, in view of the signal failure of the enterprise, to reduce the pictures to a price of one dollar, which would represent less than the actual manufacturing cost, it is true, but which would go far, if the entire edition of fifty thousand could be sold, to reimburse the company for the very large sum which had been put into these pictures, and which, at present, there seemed to be no way of taking out. The plan was not to spend any money

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

in advertising, but to announce to the trade, and to storekeepers generally, that these five-dollar pictures were now reduced to one dollar.

If the plan had been carried out along the lines then proposed, the result must have been an absolute failure. It is doubtful if a thousand more pictures would have been sold. Instead, the following plan was suggested, and its efficacy may be left to the judgment of any student of human nature. A circular was to be prepared and mailed to every member of the Grand Army of the Republic, which at that time numbered over three hundred and sixty-one thousand men. Enclosed with that circular was to be a receipt for four dollars on account, to apply on the purchase of one of the war pictures. It was to be made out in the name of the member and signed by the publishers. The circular was to state that the regular price of the picture was five dollars, but that a comrade of any Grand Army Post

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

could secure the picture for the nominal price of one dollar. The picture would be delivered to him upon payment of one dollar, with the accompanying receipt for four dollars, which must be attested by the secretary of his post.

It was easy to imagine how this plan would work. By virtue of his membership in the Grand Army, the recipient was entitled to secure a five-dollar picture for one dollar. The offer would not be made to any one else. He, by virtue of his membership in this national order, had only to pay one dollar to secure an equivalent of five dollars. Let us admit at once that thousands of these men did not care to pay one dollar even for a five-dollar picture. But how many of them, do you suppose, would tear up the signed receipt for four dollars? Instead, they would keep it in their pocket, look at it every few days, mention it to some of their friends, and end by making the generous offer to one of these friends that if he would like

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

to avail himself of the chance, he could do it in *his* name. In other words, John Brown, as a G. A. R. man, is entitled to the picture, but John Brown does not care to buy it. His friend, John Smith, who is not in the G. A. R., however, will be very glad to take advantage of such an opportunity, and so Brown buys the picture for Smith in his (Brown's) name, paying for it with his four-dollar receipt and Smith's one dollar in money. Inasmuch as the sales of these pictures would be naturally among members of the Grand Army, the offer amounted to a virtual reduction of the price from five dollars to one dollar; yet how much more attractive was this form of making the reduction, which preserved the pictures from the shock of a precipitate and sensational discount.

### III

WE have now taken two weaknesses in human nature, namely, selfishness and acquisitiveness, and shown the baser use of the imagination in business, which rears its fabric on such weaknesses — using the word “baser” not to imply a moral defect, but merely to designate such usages as relatively less pleasing than other instances which might be cited. If time afforded, it would be easily possible to select other weaknesses of mankind, and instance how the imagination is employed in such cases; then, to take the reverse of these cases, that is, the traits not in themselves weak or base, but of which advantage is taken; such, for example, as the love of the material or concrete,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

the reasoning by analogy, the impression of value by quantity, the impression of quality by multiplication of argument, and similar instances.

It must be remembered always that it is not the price of an article which is important, but the *reason* for the price. This is one of the backbone truths of merchandising, and when once a seller gets a firm hold of this fact, and is able to apply it in its highest efficiency, he can almost devastate the trade. I have seen on more than one occasion the delight with which a retail advertiser first clearly grasps this idea. We can detect something of it in one of the illustrations just used; but now what is the reason which underlies this law? Is it not this: that the argument for the price is the imaginative part of the transaction? The price itself is absolutely unimaginative. Admit that the reason for the price is an important thing in the transaction, and that a high price with a good reason will sell more goods than

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

a low price with a poor reason, and it is only reaffirming, in another form, the potentiality of the imagination in business.

The bankrupt stock, the fire sale, the manufacturer's remnants, the annual clearance, the removal sale, the dissolution-of-partnership sale—what are these, and many more, but arguments for the price? And note this one point: that without the argument the price is powerless. Reduce your fur-lined overcoats from \$100 to \$60, and your liberal discount attracts little attention. Why? Because there is no reasonable explanation for the reduction. Why should you present overcoats to the public? But announce that, owing to an expiration of your lease, and the imperative command that you vacate your present store within two weeks, you will reduce the price of your fur-lined overcoats from \$100 to \$80, and you may sell easily all you have to offer. Instinctively, the public sees the whole

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

picture—the proprietor's anxiety, the inevitable removal, the vanishing days, the final sacrifice, and the store full of eager buyers quick to seize such an opportunity. This is only half the reduction previously considered; but one is business without imagination, and the other is business with it.

Approach the whole question from another standpoint. Perhaps there is no better index of the value of imagination in business than the immense importance which attaches to the selection of a name for any article. To describe an article in an imaginative vein is to sell it at once to many persons; merely to give it a good name is to sell it to a few. So important is this matter held to be by those who have successfully grasped the value of imagination in business, that it has been used for no less an object than the stifling of competition. Let us assume that to-morrow you decide to embark in the business of manufacturing a toilet soap, to compete

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

with some of the well-known makers. It is important that it should have a significant or attractive name. That is a first consideration. But, right at the outset, you discover that it is almost impossible to secure any satisfactory name for a new soap. Its color, transparency, and clearness suggest the title of "amber soap." Yes, surely "amber soap" does have an attractive sound. But you cannot use the word "amber," for you find that this is one of a list of twenty-four possible names for a toilet soap, pre-empted by registration as a protectionary measure, years ago, by one of the leading American soap-makers. They have covered over one hundred names in the past quarter of a century, willingly paying the registration charges of twenty-five dollars for every title. Of course, they do not intend to use them; they register them to fight off competition, believing (and here is the important point!) that no clever business man (and it is such competition

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

which alone they fear)—that no clever business man would embark in the enterprise of manufacturing a new soap, when from the start he was prevented from employing the powerful weapon of imagination in giving it a suitable name. If an establishment like this, directed by some of the ablest heads in the business world, believes that it can discourage competition by simply depriving the would-be competitor of the appeal to the imagination in the naming of his soap, how great a value must we attach to imagination in business!

Speaking of pre-empting trade names against possible competition, I knew one firm who believed in this above all other precautionary measures, and carried it to a great length. They, too, manufactured an article for household consumption, so that the situation was much the same as in the case of the soap-maker. In this connection I am reminded of my first acquaintance with them, and the curious manner in which

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

my employment began; the affair had in it some unusual and striking features in a business which was never without its unique situations. One day in the late eighties (I had been in business then less than six years) I received a call from the president of the company. He said that he should have occasion to use my services at some time in the future, and he preferred now, at the very start, to make sure that I formed no entangling alliance with any of his competitors. He therefore suggested that his company should pay me a retainer, and that for that retainer I need do no work, but merely sign an agreement to render no "aid or comfort" to any house in his line of trade. I had already one or two similar agreements to this, and I gladly assented to his plan. He proposed a compensation of one hundred dollars a month, and as this was merely to cover his right to call on me for service and not to be regarded as payment for that service,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

I was under the impression that he was treating me very liberally. I wish now that I knew just what the true situation was at that time. Perhaps, after all, it was only a part of that same business policy of his which had pre-empted all the possible names. In any case, my salary was paid regularly on the first day of each month, but I was never called on for any work. At the end of sixteen months I wrote a brief letter to the effect that I seemed to be of no use to them, and unless some work was under contemplation I should prefer to cancel the agreement. To tell the truth, I thought they had forgotten that I was being paid a salary every month, and I disliked the idea of rendering no equivalent. Their reply was equally brief. Work would come eventually; meanwhile if they were satisfied, I ought to be. They had not forgotten that I was on the pay-roll.

I think it was close upon two years before I received any work. Then

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

came a day when three determined men descended on me with a scheme or plan of business development which involved more of an outlay than I had ever faced before. The plan had been entirely perfected before they came to Boston; they simply wanted it tested for weak spots, but a certain aggressiveness of manner indicated that no weak spots would be found. Now it would have been humiliating, after two years of drawing salary against this day of reckoning, if I had no more to offer than a mere approval of their scheme. I thanked my lucky stars that I cordially disliked the whole plan. And yet, somehow, I could not shoot holes in it. All I could say was that instinctively I distrusted it, and I asked for twenty-four hours in which to locate my distrust specifically. They went back to their hotel, and I went behind a locked door. In twenty hours I had gathered my array of projectiles, and we came together. For two days I

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

fought that plan in all its possible bearings with no result. Then on the third day the president of the company came over to my side. On the fourth day the other two capitulated. Later I saw them off at the depot, and my friend the president (for so I regarded him now) whispered in my ear, "You don't need to worry about that unearned salary; you've squared the account to-day."

Referring once more to trade-names, more striking instances of this endeavor to intercept competition may be found by a perusal of the trade-titles and trade-marks registered in Great Britain. Ten years ago there were only 27,000 trade-names registered in the United States as against 182,000 registered in England. The English, from whom we have borrowed the idea of protection by registration, take most of our American names that have any originality or value, if the owner for any reason has left them unregistered at

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

the expiration of the six months during which the trade-name is protected for filing in Great Britain. English manufacturers have gone to the extent of protecting themselves, not merely in their own line of goods, but in all lines of manufacture, thereby preventing their trade-name from becoming commonplace by its repeated use. Thus the word "Sunlight" has been registered by its owners, not merely as the name of a soap, but for practically every article of household use to which the name could be applied.

By a peculiarity of the English copyright laws, it is not permitted to cover every article with one name. The various articles of domestic use are arranged in groups, and one article in each group must be left unprotected to conform to the law. In this case at hand, no little ingenuity has been used in selecting as the subject of each omission an article to which the name "Sunlight" could scarcely apply — as, for

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

example, Sunlight Andirons. I think this was one of the articles in one of the groups left unprotected. The English charge is £10 for each registration, exclusive of all fees, and some manufacturers have expended close to \$50,000 in this form of protection. When we see shrewd manufacturers investing such sums on their belief that you ruin a man's chances when you curtail his ability to employ imagination, is it not another proof of the value of imagination in business?

Does all this precaution, this extravagant foresight, seem to place too great emphasis on the value of a mere name? I cannot think so. Nor would many of my readers if they had assisted at a few trade christenings, and seen the thought, time, and money expended in the search for a suitable name. It fell to my lot from time to time to supply titles for various trade articles. It was not without the exercise of some mental gymnastics that I could cover the wide-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

ly different demands involved in finding at once suitable names for a stove, a parasol, and a cemetery. Yet the happy choice of an imaginative, suggestive, or picturesque title would increase inevitably the sales of that especial article. Under the inspiration of a good name, even the cemetery would become more popular. Tradenames in themselves may be assets of great value, and in some cases, such as a dramatic play or a patent medicine, it is hard to exaggerate the worth of a good title.

## IV

LET me try now to illustrate the use of imagination in business by three business problems. I select them partly because of their remoteness from the present in point of time (there being little harm in my speaking of the occurrences at this late date), and partly because they typify widely different cases.

The first is a retail problem, the circumstance of a carpet house. The general question was whether the volume of business could be enlarged. This firm was advertising extensively in the daily papers, and such advertising is the fool's first resort and the wise man's last one. It is the proper remedy in about one in four cases of the kind here

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

considered. It could hardly be used advantageously in a carpet business, for the reason that carpets are not tempting merchandise. In other words, one is not prompted by any advertisement to rush out and buy carpets. One buys them when one needs them. The buying of carpets is done in a cold-blooded way.

Once a year, rarely oftener, a family decides that it wants a new carpet. This is usually at the strenuous period known as "spring cleaning." But there is a more important time than this, and that is when the family is removing from one house to another. Probably from twenty to thirty per cent. of all buying of carpets is induced by a change of residence. Estimated roughly, there is one day in the year when each householder may buy carpets; accordingly, on three hundred and sixty-four days of the year the advertising of specific carpets for that man is wasted. For *every* man it would be wasted three

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

hundred and sixty-four out of three hundred and sixty-five days, and such a proportion of waste will not permit of profitable advertising. The important thing, then, was to get at people when they were about to move, and it seemed to me at the start that the key to the situation was the real-estate agent. In this direction work was begun.

The plan was to secure from real-estate agents, for some slight consideration, a complete record of all changes and removals from house to house in that city and its suburbs. The work had proceeded only a short distance, however, before it became evident that this was a wrong analysis of the case. The real-estate agent was not the correct clew; it was the furniture-mover! Many persons might effect a change of residence, especially in the upper class (and these changes were most valuable), without the transaction passing through the hands of any real-estate agent. But no one could remove from one residence

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

to another, whether it was from a great establishment on Washington Square to another on Fifth Avenue, or whether a lodger with one trunk moved from a room on Bleecker Street to a room on Houston Street, without employing the furniture-mover.

Accordingly new plans were laid, a competent man was engaged to carry them out, and work proceeded on the following lines. I formed a club of all the furniture-movers in that city and its suburbs. Of course, there were isolated cases here and there of men who would not "club," but within ten days an organization was perfected, comprising forty-one of the leading furniture-movers, employing seventy-six wagons. A formal agreement was entered into and signed with each furniture-mover. The consideration for which they performed their service was comparatively slight. It has long been a custom with business houses to pay for the painting of a delivery wagon on the condition that it

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

shall bear their advertisement; the name of the owner of the wagon then appears in small letters, and the wagon ostensibly is a delivery wagon of the house whose name it bears. It is generally supposed that an advertisement thus painted on a wagon moving about through the streets of a city for a year is well worth the cost of the painter's bill.

This old idea that furniture-movers like to escape the painting of their wagons was made to do duty here, and the repainting became a part of the compensation given to them under the agreement. Their wagons were all painted with the name of this carpet house; a further consideration was that the house should keep them repaired at its own expense. They were to be repainted as often as required, say once in two years, and all repairs were to be paid for unless they were occasioned by gross carelessness. Contracts were made with four or five leading carriage-painters in the city in which this oc-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

curred, and exceptionally low rates secured by reason of the large quantity of work. Similar contracts were also made with wheelwrights for repairs.

To describe the consideration given by the furniture-mover to the carpet house, let me tell what would have happened had you, at any time desiring to move from one part of that city to another, called upon one of these furniture-movers, with a view to securing his services. The conversation might have been substantially on these lines:

*Customer.* I am about to move from Thirty-second Street to Fifty-seventh Street. I don't know exactly how many loads there will be, but it is an ordinary houseful of furniture. I should like to know your charge for the job.

*Furniture-Mover.* Where are you now located?

*(Customer gives his residence.)*

And what is the new location?

*(Customer gives the address. Both replies are at once entered on a slip.)*

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

When do you propose to move?

(*The date is given.*)

Just how many loads would there be?

How many rooms are there in the house?

(*Replies noted.*)

*Customer.* Do you employ reliable and satisfactory men?

*Furniture-Mover.* Yes, sir. Here is my business card, and you will see upon the back of it what John Smith & Co., the well-known carpet house, say about me.

At this he hands the customer a business card, supplied to him without charge by the carpet house, and on the back of this business card there is a letter from John Smith & Co., stating that they understand that this man is a reliable furniture-mover who employs suitable help. The attitude with which the furniture-mover proudly regards the endorsement of John Smith & Co. is, in itself, an evidence that in the furniture-moving business, at least, Smith & Co. is readily conceded to be the leading car-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

pet house of the city. In the mean time the customer sees along the curb a number of neat-looking, attractive wagons, on each of which is the advertisement of John Smith & Co.

By direct agreement with the Smith carpet house, the furniture-mover is obliged to fill out within one hour, and forward to them by mail, a printed blank as follows:

Name of party about to move:—; present address of party:—; new location to which he is to move:—; date when he expects to move:—; number of loads he will carry:—; etc.

From forty-five to ninety of these blanks were received daily at the carpet house. When the system was started, it was the custom to send a representative, with samples, to call immediately upon the parties about to move. For a very short time one representative did all this work, but within a few months it required six representatives, of whom three went in “sampler” carts built for

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

this special work, mounted on two wheels, and in appearance not unlike an Adams Express money-wagon. The carts were finely fitted up, and contained a complete line of samples, not only of carpetings, but of upholsteries, draperies, shades, etc. The memorandums received at the carpet house went immediately to the manager of the retail department; by him they were separated according to their locality; the presumably large customers were handed to the more expert representatives, while some poor devil who was moving with a trunk from one room to another received no call, but, instead, a circular or special letter, according to his importance, in which the house offered its services in connection with any refurnishing which he might have to do, and suggested that one of their representatives call with samples on his daily round, for which, of course, there would be no charge. Meanwhile all newspaper advertising was stopped.

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

The business grew to such size that at the end of a year the carpet house had bought and was operating its own repair and paint shop. The plan worked out substantially as first conceived, with one exception. It was found necessary to employ one man whose sole business it was to go daily among the furniture-movers and keep them sharply up to their end of the agreement, insuring immediate reports on all names and complete memorandums. This experiment showed one solution of how to enlarge a retail carpet business. It was literally a gold-mine, and the business of the house was greatly increased.

## V

SO the retailer meets his difficulties and applies imagination in their solution. But the wholesaler has his problems too, and we shall find that the same panacea has lost none of its virtues as we examine a plan for the extension of a business in lithographic novelties. This house was one of the three firms who had supplied the great market of the world with its Christmas cards. The Christmas - card industry had waned, but they had caught it on its flood, and nicely calculated the moment of the ebb. The instant that the upper class of society abandoned the sending of Christmas cards, this firm was keen enough to realize that the custom was destined to have a short life, and from

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

that day drew in its manufacturing, carried a short stock, and was well equipped to take advantage of any new turn. (The firm afterward made a study of the question whether the custom of sending Christmas cards could be re-established, deciding finally that as the custom had gone out through the upper class of society, it could only re-enter through that class, and no way of re-establishing it in that direction seemed to suggest itself. Many ways were open to revive the custom in other classes of society, but this firm wisely concluded that it would be impossible to work the revival upward. The popularity of the bicycle is the only exception I know to this general rule, and it has been one of the curious anomalies in trade movements in recent years.)

The establishment in question then turned its attention to the manufacture of art novelties, booklets, hangers, etc. For these there was a fairly large demand, and the question was how to

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

double that trade. It was a difficult problem, for the goods were marketed entirely by little stationery and periodical stores—about the smallest calibre of storekeeper that can be imagined. It was out of the question to sell to the consumer direct, as that would instantly antagonize the retailers then handling the goods. It seemed almost impossible to infuse any enterprise and life into these little two-by-four storekeepers, in whose hands lay absolutely the future prosperity of the business. However, upon a closer study of the conditions, the point which attracted my attention was the divergence in the volume of business done by different stores. Two, located in Cleveland, Ohio, and in Providence, Rhode Island, amid relatively similar conditions, and appealing to the same class, were doing a totally different business. The two constituencies were substantially alike; but one store was doing a business of \$300, and the other of \$3,000.

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

This indicated broadly that but few of these little storekeepers understood how to push his business, and it at once suggested the course which should be taken: first, to acquaint the trade, immediately and confidentially, with this state of affairs; and, secondly, for this house to offer, as a committee of the whole, to investigate the various methods by which the business could be developed, reporting estimates and figures, with attested results as to each method. In other words, if a man in Philadelphia had employed successfully the method of making five, ten, fifteen, and twenty-five-cent counters, the house proposed to investigate the whole system and its results, and report its findings to all who joined the movement. If another man in another city had established one-dollar, two-dollar, three-dollar, and five-dollar packets, and made a great success, the workings of that system would be explained, telling just what to avoid and what to do. In a similar

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

way, to investigate the method of sending canvassers, with books of samples, to interview customers in person; the wisdom of advertising in magazines; and all the different ways by which one and another man in different parts of the country had made any success.

It was supposed that possibly three hundred dealers might join this movement. The first circular was sent out, and within six weeks twenty-nine hundred small storekeepers and their clerks had united with the lithographing firm in the undertaking. The movement was continued successfully for several years. It grew out of its original limitations, and the monthly reports began finally to discuss methods of salesmanship, taking individual articles and illustrating various methods of presentment.

Here we see a different application of imagination, a sort of outward application to lubricate the stiffening joints of business. Let me now, as the third

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

illustration, take an instance where the medicine was compounded to be taken internally. It was the question of a humble employé. We will say his name was Mills, and he was one of the army of workers in the service of a wholesale and retail clothing house. He came to me with his serious problem: he had been employed by this house for three years in the wholesale department; he had received one small raise of salary at the end of the first year, and now, after two years of waiting, he was side-tracked, as he thought, hopelessly stalled on the road to business success, one of the innumerable teeth in the mighty gear, of no special value, and with no prospects whatever for the future. He wanted to marry (on seven dollars a week!), and this had added to his discontent with his surroundings. He came to ask me whether he had not better give up his situation, and trust to luck to find something better. I urged at once against such a course, and told

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

him to look for something better while still holding his present situation. He said he had tried that for some time, but found himself restless. I said to him, "Mills, the important thing for you in this matter is to ascertain whether you are paid all that you are worth; and, that settled, whether you can make yourself worth any more. But first of all let us see if you can make yourself worth any more, whether you are paid it or not. If you can, you had better stick, and look for your raise at the first fair opportunity." He agreed with me in my hypothesis, but said he did not quite understand how that could be found out. I said, "I cannot find it out to-day, but if you will put yourself in my hands absolutely for three months, I will guarantee that we shall both have an answer to that question." He agreed, and I went ahead. Here were my instructions to him:

"For the first thirty days I want you to put your mind on one thing only;

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

drop all outside nonsense, and focus your entire attention, thought, and energy upon this question: By what method which *you* can devise can your house sell \$100,000 worth more of goods every year than they are now selling? (Mills gasped!) Or \$10,000 worth more? Or \$1,000 worth more? *Or \$100 worth more?* When you have discovered your plan, work it all out on paper, put down the figures in black and white, verify every item of expense, and take the complete showing, at a favorable moment, to the man on whom you must depend for your raise of salary. However good the idea may be, when you present it to him view it tentatively; tell him as modestly as you can that you believe that the prosperity of the house should be as truly your concern as his; that both your fortunes are in the same boat; say frankly that you hope it may not seem presumptuous that you should seem to suggest reforms or changes, but that you are really interested in the suc-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

cess of the business, and it is this interest which must be blamed for any seeming intrusion on your part. Put it to him modestly; if he decides that the idea is not good, say you are sorry for having wasted his time, and get out as quickly as you can. Then go to work on another idea. When you carry this to him, if he negatives it also, make your excuses and ask him if there is any objection to your still studying and trying to plan out some method by which the business can be extended."

In a general way, with a good deal more of explanation, I think I made him understand how he was to present his idea, so that in no case would he be in danger of losing his position or the good will of the firm, by seeming to have their interests very closely at heart. Thirty days passed, and Mills came to me. His report was brief. With all his thinking, he had found no method by which the business of the firm could be extended

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

even one hundred dollars a year. I then put him to work upon his second month's labor, which was this: "See whether you can discover any method by which, while losing no present advantage or trade, the firm can transact its present volume of business with greater economy, so that, by your improved methods of conducting the business, there shall be effected a saving of \$50,000 a year; or \$5,000 a year; or \$500 a year; or \$50 a year!" I thought he drew a rather long breath as he left me to go to work for thirty days on this proposition; but he, more or less manfully, went through the second stage of his labors, and at the end of another thirty days he came back to me with his report. He had been able to discover no new method whereby the firm could economize on its present system. He had, however, discovered one thing—namely, that he would not need to go ahead for another thirty days with our experiment, for he had about

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

made up his mind that he would continue where he was.

I said to him, "So, Mills, you don't care for any more of my advice? Well, this time, I am going to give it to you without your wanting it. My boy, just realize for one moment where you stand. With the enormous volume of clothing business which is being done, and with the undoubted expansion which can be effected, you are not able, though you have worked three years in this house, to increase the volume of this business one hundred dollars a year; with the elaborate and necessarily wasteful methods in which that great business is transacted, you are not near enough to it to be able to point out a better system in any department whereby the small sum of fifty dollars a year may be saved. Now, Mills, let me give you a last word of advice, and it is valuable advice. My boy, lie low! Attract just as little attention to yourself as you can. Don't let the proprietors or manager re-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

member that you have been three years in their employ, if you can help it. You are an absolutely unproductive man. If they knew how little capable you are of development and progress, they would change you off to-morrow for some young man of greater promise. Lie low, my boy. Keep out of prominence as much as you can, and go down on your knees to-night and thank God that you have got a situation where you are paid all that you are worth. I don't mean that you are a bit inferior to thousands of other young men who are in the stores and wholesale houses in this city; but you, like them, are simply sitting upon the head of the one brainy man who sits in the counting-room. He has to solve all these problems. You and fifty others in your establishment are just sitting on top of his head, like so many dead weights. If the business prospers you expect a raise of salary, when it is his head-work that has gained every inch of the progress. He has to carry you all."

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

The young man went off, sadder and wiser than he came. For the four years thereafter in which I was able to follow his course, he held the same place and at the same salary. Now, in a last word, what was the object of this experiment? Of course, I didn't expect that this boy was going to revolutionize the clothing trade. It was simply to find out whether he had in him any imagination which he could employ in his business. I was willing to stake my prediction of his fate on the result of that one question, and I think the years have shown him that I was right.

But now the reader may ask whether it is possible to carry the helpful employment of imagination still further down into the ranks of unskilled labor. Indeed it is possible, and it is just the unskilled laborer who most benefits from its use. For him a very little imagination will go a long way and often work wonders. It only needs that you shall supply it, and tell him how to use

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

it. We have already seen imagination applied to the bootblack's business; now let us take the most hopeless situation that can be found—that of the unpractical, stranded man, out of employment, knowing no trade, having no capital (except a man's ordinary strength), and without hope, courage, or faith in himself. We all know such cases. They are simply men who have failed many times, and finally lost heart completely. They are willing to work, but they have no work, don't know how to get it, don't know what work to get, don't know how to do it properly when they get it. To such straits has many an honest, self-respecting man fallen under the repeated blows of fortune. His unpracticality made the failures, the failures made the despondency, the despondency paralyzed the will.

Now what can we do for him? How shall we get him up on his feet? You can ease *your* pain by giving him money, and so sinking him a little lower. Try

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

for something much finer than that. Why not give his case the benefit of just a little of that imagination that we have been considering, and that will come to your aid if you will simply put yourself for a few minutes squarely into his shoes, and then ask yourself what you would do if you were he and needed work. Don't tell him to apply at some of the big stores or factories; he has made many such applications; his own poor imagination has helped him to that extent. *Keep him away from the beaten track!* There are professions and occupations to be discovered all around you that as yet haven't been worked at all. I will tell you what was suggested the other day to one poor fellow of this sort. He was told to make a business of going round to houses and washing pet dogs for their owners. You laugh at it perhaps, but it didn't take over a month to create for that poor man a good business that was non-competitive and independent. He charged fifty

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

cents a dog, and in most cases it was a regular weekly service. It was not difficult to get the business. There was no one else doing it, and your wife will tell you that the washing of a dog is not the scheduled work of any one of the maids in the house. I admit it's not easy work, nor always agreeable, but personally I would rather do it than sell coal-hods in the basement of a department store from eight o'clock in the morning till six o'clock at night. In the dog-washing business you are independent; you work for yourself; you operate a genuine industry; no superintendent dictates your hours, or discharges you at his pleasure; you are your own boss. This last may seem a little thing, perhaps, but to the man who has one spark of ambition or one remnant of self-esteem yet left to him it may mean much. It is a finer thing to make a human being fit for liberty than to set him free, and in this small chance to govern his own

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

career there is the seed of true independence.

The same rule holds good with that peculiarly unfortunate person—the indigent gentlewoman. In every such case there is usually some forgotten accomplishment, some unused capacity, some *métier*, which can be made to yield a decent livelihood by employing a little imaginative skill in its application. The woman's exchange of industries (if there is one near at hand) is a valuable ally. I knew one case where a long-treasured family receipt for a certain kind of cake was given, and after a little experimenting the cake became widely popular. To-day it is a business in itself, and the making of this cake gives employment to several persons. I knew of another lady who was also compelled to earn her living, and to whom it was said, "People are very negligent about supplying themselves with postage-stamps. There are letter-boxes everywhere, but few places for buying stamps

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

Go into the thickly settled avenues and try the apartment houses. Carry with you a large and assorted stock of every denomination of postage-stamps, with some sizes of stamped envelopes and post-cards. At every door say, 'I sell postage-stamps on commission. You can buy of me anything you want at cost, with an extra charge of five cents for the accommodation.'" She went to work. Perhaps it was that people were interested merely in the novelty of the service, but in any case the lady found sufficient business awaiting her, and she got a fair living out of it. This was long ago, before the present strict rules against peddling in apartment houses.

Let me tell you of another woman. It was just before the halcyon days of electric lighting, when people were multiplying the use of piano-lamps, reading-lamps, student-lamps, and every kind of patent burner. She was told to perfect herself in the proper care of

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

lamps and become an expert in cleaning them, trimming and fitting wicks, regulating the height and smoothness of the flame, and, in short, making those lamps burn with flawless brilliancy. She did this, and with surprising speed she soon had a business of her own. Her little business card announced that she would take entire expert care of all the lamps in any house for a small nominal charge, keeping them filled, trimmed, and practically odorless because clean. Here was the opportunity to get rid of a daily chore which was peculiarly repugnant to most housekeepers. No wonder the business grew!

Similar instances might be cited, but they would only serve to accentuate the one important lesson in all this kind of practical philanthropy — namely, keep away from the beaten track, and offer the public some new and unperformed service of practical utility.

(Yesterday I had just finished writing the above incident when a lady came to

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

me and said, "I have found a needy gentlewoman who must have a means of livelihood. I have tried to use your 'Imagination' formula in her case, and here is the result: I am going to have her make peanut bread for diabetes patients." Then she explained to me certain facts; it appears that peanut bread is a most needed diet in the treatment of diabetes; the disease is a very common one; yet no one sells peanut bread and it is quite difficult to make it. I think her idea is excellent, and I believe it is practical. It will be an easy matter to reach such patients through the medical profession and the drug-gists. Perhaps this idea has started one woman on the road to independence. Let us hope so!)

## VI

IN the search for some course of action which shall change an existing situation of business depression and accomplish a desired infusion of new trade, we must beware of using mere invention, which is a very different quality from imagination. Invention works blind-folded; it may hit the mark at which it aims, or it may not. In either case it does not realize and interpret the vital facts as they exist (which is what we require), but it creates new and original formulas which often shine with fictitious splendor because they are bizarre and novel. This random shooting, this quest for the wonder-worker, is very different from that penetrative imagination which, taking the facts as they

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

plainly exist, deals alone with them, vitalizes them, realizes their significance, interprets their meanings, and follows them to their last logical conclusion. That is the work of imagination, and let us remember that it is imagination alone which can make a genuine discovery. Afterward, when the discovery has been made, it is invention that comes in and decides the device or plan by which the discovery shall be worked out.

This distinction between imagination and invention is no mere insistence on catch-words, but a fact of great importance which must be kept always in mind in every effort to solve a business problem. A single illustration will make this clear. In the work of "business counsel," which for twenty years I undertook to perform, it was dangerous and costly to blunder. In fact, prolonged blunderings will put the "business counsellor" out of business. I lived under the perpetual penalty of

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

“results”; nothing else justified the unpleasant position of assuming to tell a man how to mind his own business. Inevitably the trial of my proposed plans involved expense, often committed the house to a distinct “stand” before the public, and if unsuccessful would spell delay. Furthermore, no mere brief trial of a new plan was a sufficient test. The demonstration might be accomplished in a month’s time, but more often it was three months, frequently six to nine months, and perhaps a year. Then, too, money had to be spent, sometimes in large sums. Now, it requires very little courage to spend your client’s money on a carefully approved and exhaustive advertising campaign in the daily papers, for many have travelled this path before and “Experience worketh hope.” But very rarely was my problem as simple as that. I was breaking new trails, and not hunting in company. Of course I made failures—but here is the point which I wish to

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

impress! When I failed it was almost always because I had unconsciously substituted invention for imagination. I had struck a "snag" perhaps, then grown weary in trying to circumvent or remove it, and working along the line of least resistance, I had "invented" a remedy. I had worked from the outside and not from the inside.

And now for the illustration of this. The circumstance I am about to relate will long be fresh in my memory, for it was the hardest nut I ever tried to crack, and my effort extended over a period of several years. In the interest of the makers of elastic webbing I had tried to popularize the Congress shoe. The chief complaint against it had been that the elastic would weaken, and the shoe consequently lose its shape before its complete service had been rendered. A plan was devised for insuring the best grade of elastic for the entire life of the shoe without extra charge, so that, if for any cause the elastic failed, the shoes

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

could be handed by their owner to any expressman at any point in the United States, Canada, Mexico, West Indies, or the Sandwich Islands, and by him be carried to the elastic factory, there to be re-gored with new elastic and then delivered back to the original shipping point, *entirely without expense to the owner of the shoes.*

Under this plan, which was guaranteed by a binding warranty running directly to the wearer of the shoes, the Congress shoe in the late eighties was a safer purchase than any other shoe, for its service at the most vital point was absolutely guaranteed. Added to this it was a more labor-saving and time-saving shoe to put on and off the foot, and it had advantages which appealed to the sensible American. All other shoes had radical and annoying defects. Laces broke and soiled the hands, buttons worked loose, refused to remain buttoned and came off, but the quick-working Congress shoe with its elastic

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

feature forever insured, was a winning proposition. In three years from the starting of the guarantee plan, we had secured a large proportion of the men's shoe trade of the country. I think it is safe to say that a goodly percentage of the shoes then worn by men in the United States were Congress shoes. The notable exceptions were the brogans of the Western farmers, and the few button and lace shoes which were worn by the young men in the cities of the Atlantic seaboard—in what we called the "dude belt." Prosperity was at hand, and profits came fast.

But sometimes a cloud no bigger than a man's hand (in this case, let us say no bigger than a man's foot) will spread till it obscures the whole heavens, and the cloud which darkened our prosperity started in just such a microscopic form: *a few more of the Eastern dudes began wearing laced shoes!* And now slowly the "dude belt" began to widen. At first it gave us no concern; after all,

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

they were only dudes, freakish in their taste and inconsequent in affairs. But the next year the Atlantic breezes were blowing laced shoes from Boston and New York into cities as far west as Albany. This was annoying, yet it was not necessarily serious. An infection which might be deadly to city dudes surely would not for a moment disturb the "cross-roads" trade. The country Reubens were immune to fashion, and it was doubtful if even the smaller cities would feel the effects of the contagion. We believed then that it would desolate the large Eastern cities, but spare the West, most of the smaller Eastern cities, and all of the towns. Yet the storm area spread out as it journeyed westward, and, slowly retreating before it, we contested every inch of ground as far as Chicago. We had need to fight, for now we knew what it was that we were fighting—the most dangerous and unconquerable enemy that ever crosses the path of trade, FASHION.

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

The great problem was to bring back the Congress shoe into favor, and on that problem I went to work. The prayers and hopes of the whole elastic industry were behind me, and my own reputation was before me. I never for a moment doubted the success of the issue. I worked as I never worked before. Weeks passed, yet with no visible results from my end. Months passed, and I had not been able to originate one new idea that would pass muster before my own analysis, not to mention the later necessary approval of my clients. I had reached a point now where I dreamed nightly of Congress shoes, but there was no respite. After two years of working without discovering any way to successfully turn the tide of Fashion, I felt that, so far as I was concerned, the struggle was hopeless, and I proposed to give up my job. But I was not permitted to stop. My clients calmly said: "Keep on! There must be some solution! The Congress shoe is intrinsi-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

cally the best shoe. The American people want the best shoe. You have only got to reach their sober second judgment, and you surely can find some way to do this. We want you not to cease your efforts for one day till you find some way to bring the Congress shoe back into popularity. Remember that the American people are not fools!"

So I worked on. It was a tough chore, but alternating between hope and despair, I kept at the job. Another year passed. The trade situation now had become very discouraging; one or two factories had been closed down; a long list of skilled workmen had disappeared from the pay-rolls; the number of Congress shoes worn by men had dropped to a small fraction of its former figures. And now I worked under the goading of almost constant entreaty for four more years! Things didn't get much worse because they couldn't. The president of one of the large com-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

panies kept me busy checking over his prolific supply of ideas and reading the literature with which he swamped my office. And then at the end of seven years *the light dawned!*

At least, I thought it was the dawn, and so did all who saw it. I lay no claim here to being the discoverer of the remedy, but I gladly take the blame for not seeing that in our desperate straits we were substituting invention for imagination. In the flood of literature that I have just mentioned there came to my desk one day a copy of the *Statistical Report of the Interstate Commerce Commission*, and among its records there was a mortality table of the number of persons killed and injured on all American railways in the preceding year. My attention was called to a curious feature of this table. While 6,136 persons had been killed on railroads in the United States in that year, the total number of dead *passengers* was only 170. In other words, the

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

popular conception of the danger of being killed while riding as a passenger on any railroad train was grossly exaggerated. Railroad accidents didn't kill *passengers*; they killed employés and they killed the outside public, but rarely did they kill their own passengers. In the above death-roll it was only a fraction over *two per cent.*! Yet 507,-421,362 passengers were carried by the railroads that year, and the total of 170 killed was approximately only one passenger in three millions. Hence, with a very small per cent. of American men wearing Congress shoes, and with only 170 out of 76,000,000 Americans being killed while passengers on railroad trains, it was evident that we could afford to insure without charge the life of every man who was killed while riding as a passenger on any railroad in the United States, *provided he had Congress shoes on his feet when he was killed!*

This last feature was important. He

had got to die in his Congress shoes or he got no insurance. He might have worn Congress shoes for six months prior to his death, but if he happened to leave them off on the day he was killed he lost his insurance. If the shoes were in a travelling-bag by his side, he still had no claim; he had literally got to *die in his Congress boots* or his heirs got nothing on his policy.

Now there is an enormous amount of workingmen's life insurance which is paid for by the workingman in weekly instalments out of his salary, and these constant weekly payments are not always easy to meet. But here he could secure one form of life insurance (limited to railroad accidents) at no cost except that he wear Congress shoes. An arrangement was entered into with one of the large insurance companies, and for two years the life of every man who wore Congress shoes was insured in the way I have indicated. But the trade results were

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

disappointing. Notwithstanding the great number of travelling salesmen who need just such insurance, notwithstanding the large demand for accident insurance tickets by the travelling public, we could not bring back the popularity of the Congress shoe in this way. We couldn't play "Insurance" against "Fashion" and win. We had *invented* the insurance remedy and it was outside the issue. It failed.

I have gone at inexcusable length into the details of this illustration because we can afford space for only one example, and it is of great importance to keep clearly in mind where imagination ends and invention begins. Invention is rarely analytical, penetrative, or pertinent. In working out a problem the mind should not travel for one instant beyond the point where it sees clearly the *cause* of the trouble. Overlook the cause and treat only the effect, and you are inviting invention to do the work of imagination.

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

And now let me speak of another source of similar danger. There is a curious lack of directness in the view which most men take of their own business problems. They cannot easily assume the attitude of a disinterested observer. Often the mere suggestion of a new point of view will start the mind at work to some purpose. Recently a portion of this essay appeared in a monthly magazine, and its publication brought me many inquiries and requests for assistance in solving business problems. Without attempting to study the conditions of the different cases (for which I had no leisure at that time), I was often able to ask a few questions which served to indicate the line of thought that the inquiry might take. Then the analysis which must precede a careful and truthful answer to those questions would bring the mind to a simpler and more direct point of view.

Thus, one inquiry was from a retail

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

store selling a standard line of goods which was practically duplicated in other neighboring stores. This retailer was on a main thoroughfare; his competitors were on the same thoroughfare; he wanted more of the business; how could he get it? I asked him one question: "What possible reason is there why persons should pass all these other stores and come to your store to buy?"

He thought a moment and then said: "Then you don't think I can get the business?"

I said: "Quite the contrary! I think you can get a lot of their business—after you have thought over that question and asked it of yourself in one form or another a hundred times in the next six months."

He said: "It's a gloomy sort of question. If anything would discourage a man from further trying right at the outset it would be putting the thing in that form."

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

I said: "That's just where you're on the wrong track. That question has *got* to be asked and answered before you will see this new business. Here are five stores, fairly close to each other, all selling the same merchandise. You are only entitled to one-fifth of the total trade. For every dollar above that amount which comes to you there must be a reason. You've got to create that reason. If the trade comes and you don't know the reason, it's worth your while to discover it. Some customers travel on the line of least resistance; you must make the line of least resistance lead directly to your store. All customers are influenced more or less by one or another of a dozen different considerations; you must weigh every one of those considerations and recognize its existence. Again and again you must ask yourself, 'Why in the world should these people pass four other stores and come bang into this one? There has got to be a reason for

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

it.' Now I believe that the mere asking of this question constantly—provided it is always followed by a well-considered, serious answer, coming after ten or fifteen minutes of reflection and study—the mere question and answer, I say, forever and forever repeated in one form or another, is bound to bear fruit. If you doubt it, just try it for three months."

So ended the time I could give to his problem. The question I proposed to him was only a sign-post, nothing more. I wonder whether he is going ahead on the road on which I tried to start him or whether he is still merely staring at the sign-post.

I received some inquiries from educational institutions wanting additional pupils. One was a State college, two were large academies, one was a kindergarten. To one of these I wrote, suggesting that the point of view indicated by the following questions might be taken as a starting-point:

1st. You want new pupils. Where

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

are those pupils at present? Who has them?

2d. Who decides the selection of the school they shall attend?

3d. What consideration most influences the decision?

4th. What are you doing to warrant the belief in the minds of No. 2 that your school is superior along the lines indicated by No. 3?

This points the way along which the work may begin. But these questions remind me of a fatal error into which many business men fall. *They are not frank with themselves!* There is an old adage that there are three persons to whom you should always tell the whole miserable truth—your lawyer, your physician, and yourself. Now there is one question that I often want to ask a client, but am sometimes prevented from asking—"How much humbug is there in this?" In other words, if all the facts about your business, your goods, the service rendered, and the values given

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

were known to a buyer, and he also had the same information about your competitors, would his trade come to you? Half the men to whom you ask this question will answer "Yes." Some do so from ignorance, and some from insincerity. In either case it is a blunder. Because the method to be pursued if you are humbugging is not the method to be followed if your pretensions are absolute facts. Bill Nye used to tell the story of a man who once charged him a dollar for a sandwich. Nye thought he detected in this some new business boom or unique condition, and taking the man aside confidentially he offered him fifty cents to tell him truthfully why he asked this price. The man said: "Well, I don't mind telling you in confidence. The fact is, I need the money."

I often want to ask a client, after he has told me his story: "Are you really such a benefactor to humanity or do you merely need the money?"

## VII

THE most interesting because the most difficult problems came usually from the manufacturer; the simplest came from the retailer, and yet he was always the most persistent and urgent in his appeals for help. He seemed to live closer to his business. A retailer's problem may usually be divided into two parts: first, to get people inside the store; secondly, to make them purchase. As a rule, the first was the work I was called on to do, because nearly every retailer had an unflinching conviction that if I would deliver the man or woman inside his door, he could guarantee the sale. So we often divided our labors on the line of the threshold, and when the store was filled I could sit

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

back and let his salesmanship do the work.

And yet salesmanship is very far from dispensing with the use of the imagination, for the essence of successful advertising to-day is merely sublime salesmanship. If you advertise an article it ought to be so vividly and temptingly described that the purchaser is not satisfied to take one at random from the stock on hand, but insists upon having the identical one that you have been using as your sample in the demonstration. Here, then, is your guide to one factor in good advertising—invest the article with strong, intense individuality. Make it alive on the printed page. Hang up your suit of clothes in the newspaper so that the customer not merely reads about it, but actually *sees* it and *feels* it. Describe it so that it shall stand out as distinct from every other suit as you yourself stand out distinct from other men. Yet give it the individuality that is true to its

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

character, and not merely a random individuality that shall serve to sell it. In other words, let your individuality be in traits, qualities, and characteristics, not in words, phrases, and forms of speech.

I hope it is not necessary to point out the imperative need of truth in the letter and detail; we shall never get truth in the spirit, I fear, till all men's mental processes move on parallel lines. Imagination will run riot in the spirit of a description, but don't let it color a single concrete figure of measurement. I believe it is easily possible to take a kitchen chair and describe it in such an imaginative spirit that the average reader would insist on buying it forthwith, and further insist on that particular chair rather than a duplicate from stock. Here the letter and detail of the description would be technically correct, so that you could not assail the positive accuracy of a single statement, but the relative accuracy would be wholly wrong, the *spirit* of the descrip-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

tion would be false, because the direction of the emphasis, the multiplicity of the detail, and the over-insistence upon the concrete (which comes from the attempt to give it individuality) would all be shockingly out of their true proportion.

I recall a case in my first year of business. I was advertising a piece of furniture which might be described as a secretary-cabinet-bookcase — a sort of combination of three articles in one. As the result of a single insertion in the morning papers of the city, over forty persons came to the store of the advertiser in the next four days and asked to see that combination piece. *Not one of those persons purchased it!* Some bought other articles; some bought nothing. Most of them were disappointed; a few complained that the piece did not come up to the description. Probably they all felt this inadequacy, whether they said so or not. Yet not one of these persons could point to a technical inaccuracy or misstatement

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

in the description. When the sympathetic salesman regretted that any error had crept into their advertisement and begged to have it pointed out, lo! there was no error. Every specific statement was aggressively true. But by over-insistence on unimportant trifles, by misdirection of just emphasis, and by exaggerated adherence to the concrete, the whole thing was as false as it well could be. The advertiser himself was satisfied, for people had been brought into the store, goods had been sold, and no one had departed with a grievance. I was satisfied because I was green at advertising and didn't know any better. Yet we were both perplexed, and at the best it was a victory of Pyrrhus. Fortunately, no harm came to either of us, for we both took the lesson to heart. I wrote many advertisements for that house in the next nineteen years, but the whip of the Scythians never descended on either of us again. I had learned a lesson.

## VIII

I HAD some unique problems presented to me in the twenty years of which I have spoken, but I found them all governed by the same laws and solvable by the same processes. On one occasion a committee from a city in one of the Middle States applied to me for some method by which they could make a graveyard fashionable. They had purchased a large tract of land and improved it at considerable cost. Now at last they had a really beautiful cemetery. But they could not get inmates for it. To use their own words, they could not "make it popular." "People don't seem to want to be buried there!" said one of them. Would I kindly tell them how to get people

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

buried there? It was a serious situation for them, with all their money invested. I doubt if they saw any humor in their request.

Once a politician who was running for governor of Massachusetts came to me. He wanted in some way to get a grip on the voters of the State. I wish I could tell you what I did in his case, but perhaps it is hardly fair, for it might lead to his identification. He was a man of large ammunition and small bore, and when the smoke of election had cleared away, there was no dent in his bull's-eye. I think any one might have stood as a target before his blundering aim with perfect safety.

At another time I was retained by a somewhat erratic man (the head of a large industry and a well-known figure in the commercial world, a man of powerful and interesting personality) to name his children. He paid me liberally for my efforts, and I devoted many hours to the work. Their ages

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

ranged from two to twelve years, and they were of both sexes. I compounded names which represented the various attributes that he especially desired them to acquire. Thus the oldest boy was to bear a name that implied two qualities—service to humanity and the spirit that triumphs over all obstacles. The oldest girl was to be given a name that suggested the ministering angel in sickness, and the sympathetic, devoted companion in all the experiences of life. At the time I thought the whole idea was very bizarre, but I have come to feel differently about it, and I believe the man was not so erratic, after all. I am not ashamed of those names, I only wish I had one of them myself; and now that the children have grown to manhood and womanhood, I hope they have forgiven me and that they are living up to them as well as they can.

Sometimes cases came from professions where an unwritten etiquette forbade the least outward effort at business

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

extension. Tradition had sternly established that the business should seek the man, not the man seek the business. So the business was sought by stealth. On three occasions I recall that authors came to ask for some method by which their books could be more successfully sold or their publisher aroused to advertise them more vigorously. I feel for those authors, now that I have a publisher. Sometimes a physician came. He wanted patients, but naturally it was unprofessional to do any one of the dozen things that would bring patients. I recommended to one ambitious physician to have a strictly unlettered and unadvertised private office in the downtown business section, and be there for an hour daily about noon. But he could not bring himself to do a thing so unprofessional. I suggested that he get some confrère to join him, so that each might make the other respectable. Still he hesitated. I know now that my advice was bad. He was right in re-

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

fusing it, and his great eventual success justified his waiting.

In looking over the records of my first years in this work, I find a case which had some unique features. A large banking house in New York wanted "advice or assistance"; as they expressed it, "something which we are told you do." They refused to state the nature of the problem till I had named a price for my aid. This was "buying a pig in a poke," and had it been an ordinary client I would have refused. But the reputation of the house was unquestioned, and I named a price which allowed me a liberal factor of safety. Then they wrote substantially as follows:

"We want more deposits. Specifically, we want the accounts of interior banks. It must not be known that we want this business, or we never can get it. The slightest effort to obtain it—in fact, almost any solicitation of it—would imply that we are not the proper

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

persons to receive it. It is the old, dignified conservative, who does not seem to care for added deposits, who gets them; the active, pushing house is apt to be viewed with suspicion. Now, conditioned on the fact that we cannot ask for this business and will not permit it to be known that we want it, will you tell us how we can secure it?"

Here was an interesting problem, and one that I keenly enjoyed. Remember that this occurred in the early eighties, when banks and trust companies held a very different view of the wisdom of publicity from what is popularly entertained to-day. We got that business—over twice as much as they had hoped to secure. It took about five months to do it, and the letter of congratulation which the house sent me when it was all over would have been worth a great deal if I could have used it without violating confidence.

But I am rambling off into reminiscence without any objective point.

## IX

IN a more comprehensive study of the subject, it would be interesting to enumerate and try to classify the great variety of problems which arise in business. To every one of these problems, imagination, if you employ it, will open the door. If you want some day to relieve the tedium of a railroad journey by employing your imagination upon a test problem, let me give you one. It was the first client I ever had. Two young men in Indiana conceived the idea that there would be a fortune for them if they could secure a whale, load him on a large special car, and carry him over the United States, giving exhibitions in every town and city through

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

which they passed, where their car could be side-tracked for one day, while the great fresh-water public saw the whale at twenty-five cents a head.

They investigated the idea thoroughly, found it practical, and put into the venture every last cent that both of them had saved. They had two elaborate cars constructed in the Pullman shops. They were built on the Pennsylvania Railroad pattern; one was a car of extra length, with special appliances for switching, curves, etc., and was to hold the whale. The sides of this car let down, and served as an inclined platform upon which people could walk up and view the "monster of the deep." The other car was a hotel car, and contained bedrooms and living-rooms, accommodations for their families, business office, ticket-office, safe, etc. They were really fine cars, costing many thousands of dollars. They even went so far as to have all their printing prepared, giving a thrilling account of the capture

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

of the whale, and every detail, discreetly omitting the mention of its exact size. Thousands and tens of thousands of posters, flyers, and circulars were printed, and then the two cars started from the Pullman works in the West, bound for Boston. They arrived in the Boston & Albany yards, where they were side-tracked while the two men went down to Nantucket to arrange for the purchase of the whale.

There is a recognized industry on the Atlantic coast in whales. The year before these young men arrived in Boston over forty whales had been caught and brought in to Nantucket. Any one capturing a whale, dead or alive, was enabled to dispose of it to an enterprising buyer in Nantucket, who stood always ready to purchase. These young men found, however, upon arriving at Nantucket, that no whale had been captured since they refused the last one, which had been landed in July—ten weeks too early for their purposes. Usually

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

the catch extends well into November, and they had counted upon the cold weather to help them in the first stages of their undertaking. But that year only fourteen whales had been caught, and although they waited in Nantucket until the season closed, no more whales appeared.

Without a cent of money, with their families on their hands, and with total assets amounting to two elaborate cars, the problem is to carry these young men through one year, making them earn enough to provide for all their necessities of life, including car-storage, and equip them in the fall of the following year with a large whale. That problem was solved; those two young men were kept alive, and their families supported, and one year later I saw the tail of a forty-five foot whale vanishing over the railroad tracks westward, where it eventually gladdened the hearts of thousands of wild and woolly Westerners at twenty-five cents a peep. I will

## **IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS**

not weary you now with an account of how it was done, but I recommend it as a pleasant little exercise for the imagination.

## X

AND now, shall we not all agree that there is a faculty which can accomplish in business such remedial and constructive work as we have been considering? It is not enterprise, nor thrift, nor industry, nor sagacity, nor courage. Nor can all these qualities combined supply the place left vacant by the lack of imagination. They each have their value, and by any of these roads a man may win to success. But the faculty of which I now conceive MAKES HIM CAPABLE OF UNDERTAKING ANY BUSINESS! He may be a successful boot-black, or the able president of a bank, or the astute manager of a circus. He *may fail*, for the imagination which enables him to comprehend human

## IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS

nature in the aggregate does not necessarily enable him to understand it in the individual. He may know human nature, but not individual nature. Hence, he may be a judge of methods but not of men.

Finally, is any apology needed for these illustrations? To some readers, perhaps, they may seem sharp and shrewd, with a little flavor of the pavement. But business is intellectual warfare, a battle of wits—in which one does not repulse solid shot with blank cartridges. It is not a theory, but a condition, which confronts the business man. He takes his medicine as he finds it compounded. It doesn't taste as he would like to have it, but no one asked him what he liked. He isn't picnicking. He's at war. He smiles through the bitter drink, and orders it up for the whole company when his turn comes!

THE END







UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



**AA 000 712 143 7**

